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Glamorous Activist

ONCE TO EVERY MAN. By William Sloane Coffin Jr. 344 pages. Atheneum. \$12.95.

Shriver wanted to know when I would next be in Washington. When I told him that Friday he said, "Fine. Where will you be staying?"

"Probably at the 'Y,'" I answered.

"The what?"

"The YMCA," I said.

He exploded. "For God's sake, stay at the Sheraton, will you? I'll pay. Just have breakfast with me there at 7:30 Friday morning."

So I stayed at the Sheraton.

William Sloane Coffin, the former Yale chaplain, civil-rights and antiwar activist and "Doonesbury" character, would seem to be the very model of a twentieth-century man. He was riding freedom buses down in Alabama at a time when John Kennedy and The New York Times ("Nonviolence that deliberately provokes violence is a logical contradiction") were nervously splitting legalisms. He got himself arrested and indicted for helping undergraduate draft resisters at Yale, and he made a mission to Hanoi. He infuriated most of Yale's stuffy rich alumni and failed in both his marriages. You can't get much more "now" than all of that.

But except for the chronological accident of being born in 1924, Coffin is very much out of a different century—at heart one of those nineteenth-century English second sons who must decide between the church and the army and who don't see much difference between them. Born into New York's wealthy few (his family founded the city's biggest good-furniture store), young Coffin summered in Oyster Bay, took his schooling at Deerfield, Andover and Yale. As a youth, he was a good enough pianist to win praise from the great Alfred Cortot and to solo with the Quincy (Mass.) Symphony Orchestra. He had an exciting, undangerous war, took his ministerial training at Union Theological Seminary and Yale Divinity School, became a career chaplain to the young and blessed—first at Andover, then Williams, then Yale, where he was carried off in the fervor of the times to honorable service in the cause of dissent. Through the years, both Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr taught him theology, Arthur Goldberg defended him in court, Erik Erikson psychoanalyzed him, all of Skull and Bones called him brother.

All in all, a hell of a life—glamorous, exciting and useful—and one can only wish that it were more richly served by

this autobiography. "Once to Every Man" is little more than the public journal of a public man—very long on anecdotes about his wartime experiences, CIA service and the famous names and places he knew in the civil-rights and antiwar efforts, but almost barren of an interior life. There may be a reason for this. Coffin tells us that he wrote the book during a particularly anguished time—after his departure from Yale and his painful second divorce, while he was pursuing some sort of peace amid the human-potential movement in California. Emotion was something to be released, privately and therapeutically, not something to be dealt with formally. He cried, he says, when he wrote of his

father's death in the early drafts—but in this final draft, there is no hint of any tangible relationship between the two.

And so with most other things that seem most pertinent to the man, if not to his public actions. I'd like to know why Coffin—recently appointed senior minister at New York's prestigious Riverside Church—became a clergyman, but all he vouchsafes is that Reinhold Niebuhr "was as eloquent a man as I had ever heard." I'd like to know how he reconciled his Christian studies with his concurrent decision to train agents to kill for the CIA. In his hands, some of his most famous moments seem hollow and false. Arrested for turning in students' draft cards, he hoped for a grand historic case on the legality of war and the Nuremberg precedents. When the 85-year-old judge would deal with him only as a petty rule breaker, the fantasy went flat—and Coffin felt justified in paying Goldberg \$25,000, none of it his own money, to stay out of jail. A hostile biographer could hardly have served Coffin worse.

—RICHARD BOETH